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ABSTRACT

Recommendations are made for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) assessment of informative, persuasive, and imaginative writing. Five major objectives should be assessed by NAEP: (1) writing as a way of thinking and learning; (2) writing to accomplish a variety of purposes; (3) managing the writing process; (4) controlling forms of written language; and (5) valuing writing. However, the present scheme for design and selection of writing tasks is very general and does not seem to measure all five objectives. A better framework, like the one developed for the International Study of Achievement in Written Composition, is needed to define, classify, and interrelate what is assessed. Detailed task specifications are also needed, as well as expanded coverage of underrepresented tasks. A synthesis of current theory and research on writing skill development and assessment should be used to explain the reasons for including certain tasks. Use of task specifications is recommended to develop teacher-designed exercises, parallel tasks, and cross-age tasks. Allowing students to choose a writing topic, providing greater amounts of writing time, and paying more attention to writing in the content are among the improvements suggested. A more balanced combination of test developers should include state and local assessment personnel, curriculum experts, and representatives of the research and measurement communities. (GDC)

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Recommendations for the Design of NAEP Writing Tasks

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

What aspects of writing are assessed:

- Develop an assessment framework.
- Develop detailed task specifications.
- Expand coverage of aspects of writing.
  - Balance coverage of writing requiring major types of critical thinking:

    Analysis
    Comparison
    Inference/interpretation
    Evaluation
- Develop writing tasks requiring use of facts, concepts, and evaluative criteria from academic content areas.
- Develop writing tasks assessing the writing process.

Why are certain aspects of writing assessed?

- Develop a rationale for what aspects of writing are assessed and how they are assessed. Reference the rationale to multi-disciplinary theory and empirical work.
- Describe how what is assessed relates to state, district, and classroom writing assessments.

How are aspects of writing being assessed?

- Use detailed task specifications to guide development of writing tasks and questionnaire items.
- Develop pools of parallel tasks.
- Expand kinds of formats, vary features of writing tasks:
  - topic options
  - extended time
  - alternative administration conditions
  - presentation of evaluative criteria
- Collect and develop a pool of writing tasks.

What is the process for developing the assessment tasks?

- Involve more consultants with expertise in measurement in general and in large scale writing assessment in particular.
- Document information about the development of effective and ineffective writing tasks.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE DESIGN OF NAEP WRITING TASKS

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Currently, the National Assessment of Educational Progress assesses five major writing objectives: Writing as a way of thinking and learning; writing to accomplish a variety of purposes; managing the writing process; controlling forms of written language; and appreciating the value of writing. Achievement of these objectives is measured by performance on three types of writing tasks (assignments)--informative, persuasive and imaginative--and by responses to questionnaires. The recommendations below are related to WHAT aspects of writing are assessed, WHY they are assessed, HOW they are assessed, and the PROCESS by which the assessment tasks and the assessment in general are designed, developed and documented.

The recommendations are based on the assumption that a national writing assessment should not only gather valid, instructionally useful information about achievement, but that it should also provide exemplary models that lead the field, i.e., NAEP should represent the best application of theory and methodology.

WHAT ASPECTS OF WRITING ARE ASSESSED?

Problem 1--Need for a Framework. The scheme that apparently governs the design/selection of writing tasks (assignments) is very general, does not seem to measure all five objectives, and does not present a coherent framework. For example, although four separate sets of cognitive objectives have been developed--writing to think and learn, writing to accomplish a variety of purposes, learning to manage the writing process, and learning to control the forms of written language--these outcomes are obviously not mutually exclusive. There is no explanation of how the actual writing assignments and questionnaire items, uniquely or in combination, measure each set of objectives. The kinds of writing tasks and reports of achievement are organized and described only according to the three broad kinds of writing--informative, persuasive and literary--included for the set of objectives for writing to accomplish a variety of purposes.

Of course, there are numerous theories and schemes for classifying types of writing assignments. Rhetorical theories, discourse theories, and text analysis schemes have all contributed to our understandings of the characteristics of various kinds of writing. Furthermore, conceptualizations of critical thinking/higher order skills drawn from theory

and research in psychology (problem solving) and philosophy (logic) also can provide far more valid and detailed frameworks of types of reasoning skills than the few general adjectives used in NAEP reports. A national assessment of writing achievement should provide to the field a synthesis (brief) of the current theory and research relevant to the development of a coherent framework which defines, classifies and interrelates what will be assessed, e.g., types of writing assignments, types of reasoning/critical thinking activities, aspects of the writing process and forms of written language. Such a general framework specifying the domain of school writing has been developed for the International Study of Achievement in Written Composition.

Problem 2--Need for Detailed Task Specifications. In addition to a general assessment framework for the aspects of writing to be tested, the writing assessment should develop and publish task specifications that identify distinctive features of each type of assignment. A number of rhetorical requirements such as discourse aim, topic and type of audience, have been shown to affect writing performance. The cognitive complexity represented by different types of reasoning, i.e., summarization, analysis, comparison, inference/interpretation or evaluation, can also affect the difficulty of the writing assignment. Such features should be used to describe the characteristics of types of writing tasks assessed and to investigate further if or how students' ability to deal with these task features differentiates levels of writing skill development. The research base for many of these task features has been summarized elsewhere, (e.g., Quellmalz, 1984,1985). (See Figure 1.) Other task specification schemes have been used in the research program on writing assessment conducted at the Center for the Study of Evaluation and in derivative planning documents used in the International Study of Achievement in Writtten Composition.

The task features in Figure 1 include rhetorical requirements such as the major discourse aim (informative, persuasive or literary) and usual discourse structure. Within major discourse aims, there are numerous subgenre that lend themselves to different methods of development. For instance, persuasive assignments may require problem/solution papers or position papers.

The content/topic of the assignment may draw upon background knowledge, may refer to academic content or may be new material. Students' knowledge about the assigned topic may be broad or limited. Furthermore, the topic may seem relevant, engaging or deadly.

The nature of the audience and the writer's role in relation to the audience can also affect performance.

The kind of reasoning--summarization, analysis, comparison, inference or evaluation--presents quite different cognitive demands upon the writer. The cognitive complexity of assessment tasks should be described in order for educators and the public to understand the differing demands of assignments and for NAEP to assure balance and coverage.

Presentation format can also affect essay quality. The amount of required content provided in the assignment for students to reference and its modality--written or visual--can be important task variables.

Other frequently neglected task features are the criteria that specify required content and structure. Students should know how their essays will be evaluated. More importantly, the criteria should be features that are important to many assignments of the same type and features that can be improved by instruction.

Finally, administration conditions can profoundly influence performance. A glaring problem in the most recent NAEP writing assessment was the time limitation. Time alloted to write affects not only opportunity to engage in the full writing process, but also time to gather required information. Classroom and workplace writing tasks not only occur within longer time frames, they often involve the input of others during planning and revision.

Problem 3--Need for Expanded Coverage. Even in the absence of an assessment framework, inspection of what is currently being assessed reveals some major gaps. Most underrepresented are writing tasks for the first set of objectives--learning to use writing as a way of thinking and learning. For example, of the eight informational writing tasks, six asked students to summarize and report information; the remaining two, identified as "analytical writing", asked students to compare frontier food with modern food and to describe a type of music and explain why they liked it. Persuasive tasks tended to ask students to rely primarily upon personal experience and value judgments for their support.

Writing tasks are needed that measure students' ability to draw and support interpretations and conclusions and also to evaluate quality and significance based upon external criteria rather than primarily upon personal opinions and values. The assessment of students' ability of writing to think and learn should include tasks that require critical thinking about background experience, previously learned academic content or newly presented information. Writing in the content areas should receive far more attention.

Another neglected area is the writing process. Direct assessment of aspects of the writing process should be developed. Samples of planning, drafting and revision work could provide additional and better information about students' command of appropriate strategies. Exclusive reliance on questionnaire self reports is inadequate.

WHY ARE CERTAIN ASPECTS OF WRITING BEING ASSESSED?

A synthesis of current theory and research on writing skill development and assessment can serve not only to guide development of an assessment framework, it can provide the rationale for the specific writing skills and tasks which are included in the assessment. Significant, recurrring tasks that writers address in school, personal and functional contexts are probably highest priority. Reasons for excluding some literary (e.g., writing a poem) or functional (e.g., taking a telephone message) tasks should be explained.

HOW ARE ASPECTS OF WRITING BEING ASSESSED?

Development of a coherent assessment framework and task specifications should guide design of the writing tasks. In the past, NAEP writing exercises have been developed inductively, i.e., preparing and piloting promising exercises, then sketching a descriptive framework that seemed to fit.

Task specifications should not only guide the development of writing assignments for the assessment, they should also guide the development of similar assignments to be used by state and/or local assessments and by classroom teachers.

Use of detailed task specifications would also permit the development of parallel tasks, i.e., writing assignments with all features the same except for the particular topic. Multiple measurements of the same skill (type of writing) are desirable features of any assessment program. The writing assignments included in the 1984 assessment fall within the three general writing type categories, but differ from each other on several task features. To make credible statements about the stability of student performance on a type of writing assignment, we should have data from more than one example of it.

NAEP should both expand the formats and features of writing assignments and administer alternative versions of the same assignment. Task features appearing in task specifications could take different forms.For example, writing tasks permitting topic selection would allow students more

opportunity to mount their best effort.

Cross age tasks, i.e., same assignment given to multiple grade levels, are desirable, however, the appropriateness, interest and knowledge accessibility of cross age topics should be documented.

As mentioned above, alternative administration conditions are desirable. Some 1984 assignments were allowed only 12 minutes; the longest were alloted only 30 minutes. If we believe that students need time to engage in the full writing process, extended writing time should be provided. Even if students do not currently use extended time effectively, future assessments, might (we hope) reveal improvement. Assignments assessing critical thinking skills, too, are likely to require more than the usual allotted time. Furthermore, some assignments should present more realistic contexts, where, for example, students can engage in extended information gathering or peer response groups.

WHAT IS THE PROCESS FOR DEVELOPING THE ASSESSMENT?

Some of the problems noted seem to derive from an absence of input from the measurement community. Detailed task specifications and parallel tasks, for example are becoming standard features of other large scale assessment programs. The writing assessment should involve more professionals with experience in the design of large scale writing assessments.

During the development of writing assignments and questionnaire items, many judgments are made about the effectiveness of particular assignments. NAEP could provide a valuable service to other educational systems trying to develop writing assessments by documenting and summarizing criteria for the development of usable writing tasks. Currently, reasons for keeping, dumping or revising writing assignments are not systematically recorded and shared.

In sum, the development of writing tasks in particular, and the assessment in general, would profit form a more balanced combination of state and local assessment personnel, curriculum experts and representatives of the research and measurement communities.

FIGURE 1

FEATURES TO CONSIDER IN THE DESIGN OF WRITING TASKS

DISCOURSE AIM

- Major aim
- Subgenre

TOPIC

- Information source
  - Personal experience
  - School subject
  - New
- Familiarity
- Interest

COGNITIVE COMPLEXITY

- Recall/summarize
- Analyze
- Compare
- Infer/Interpret
- Evaluate

AUDIENCE

- Known/Unknown
- Adult/Child
- Novice/Expert
- Positive/Negative

WRITER'S ROLE

PRESENTATION FORMAT

- Written
- Pictorial
- Media
- Live

PRESENTATION OF EVALUATIVE CRITERIA

- For content
- For discourse structure
- For conventions

ADMINISTRATION CONDITONS

- Time limits
- Availability of resources
- Individual/group interaction